GARDEN NOTES

SPRING 2025

NORTHWEST HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Clematis 'Hanajima'
Image by Richie Steffen

Pollinator Paradise

Text and Images by Del Brummet (unless otherwise noted)

THIS PAGE: Lorquin's admiral butterfly (*Limenitis lorquini*)

FACING PAGE LEFT: *Mahonia* × *media* 'Arthur Menzies' (courtesy Richie Steffen)

TOP RIGHT: *Crocus tommasinianus* (courtesy Richie Steffen)

BOTTOM: long-horned bee (*Melissodes* spp.) on *Erigeron glaucus* 'Wayne Roderick'

A buzz, a trill, a whoosh of wings . . . what's that? Bees scour the world, drinking nectar to fuel their flight and collect protein-rich pollen to nurture their young. They move along from flower to flower and are unknowing participants in the promiscuous and ancient ritual of pollination — a relationship which has evolved over millennia and is as complex as it is chaotic. Today, everyday citizens and scientists alike are worried about the plight of pollinators, as their numbers dwindle and climate change alters the timing of flowering and plant growth. Let's dive deep into the theme of Great Plants for this year: welcome to the Pollinator Paradise!

In recent years, there has been a growing movement toward planting native plants to favor pollinators. However, many gardeners with exotic plants in their gardens note that exotics support insects as well. When I talk about native plants, I'm talking about the West Coast native plants of British Columbia, Washington, Oregon and even a bit of Northern California, so I'm stretching it beyond what some might prefer. If you are a local native plants purist, you may want to stop reading right here. Using plants from much of the West Coast appears to me to have benefits in supporting pollinators as we can draw on a greater palette to provide blooms and interest in a variety of spaces. Researchers have been working across the globe to find an answer to the question of whether native pollinators are better supported by native plants, and there is some consensus that native plants play an important role in supporting native pollinators, especially earlier in the season, while exotics often help later in the season to support more generalist pollinators, particularly in urban settings. At the risk of oversimplifying a divisive topic and to put it more simply, there is evidence that native plants combined with exotics may be beneficial in the urban setting. There is so much disruption of the native landscape and pollinator pathways in urban settings that there are good reasons to use everything at your disposal, depending on the site, to benefit insects. We should all be planting a greater percentage of native plants as native plants have been found to be particularly important for specialized pollinators. Some native insects have evolved specialized relationships with local native plants, while others have general groups they favor by season, and some pollinators are total generalists and can use a wide variety of plants. Selections and cultivars of native plants also have merit, and research has found that some can even outperform straight species of native plants in pollinator visitation.

For this popular theme, Great Plant Picks focused on three major groups which are important pollinators: bees, hummingbirds and butterflies. Other groups, like beetles, moths and wasps are also pollinators and are worth considering as you build a pollinator garden. Less thought-of pollinators like hoverflies (*Syrphidae* family) are even effective as a pest control in their rebellious youth; as larvae,

Ribes sanguineum

Ribes malvaceum var. *viridifolium* 'Ortega Beauty'

bumble bee (*Bombus* spp.) on *Camassia cusickii*

they wiggle around the world and eat aphids for which we applaud them. Hummingbirds are one of the more beloved birds for good reason as they are as cute as a button and not much bigger than one. Our resident Anna's hummingbird sticks with us through the big dark and is benefitted by continuous nectar throughout winter. This can be achieved by planting different native and exotic selections of plants and Great Plant Picks serves as a useful tool for finding just that.

Using the GPP website, you can search by bloom time to try to create a continuous buffet of flowers! *Mahonia* × *media* selections bloom from fall to winter and varieties like *M.* × *media* 'Arthur Menzies' and 'Charity' are just a couple of options which can grow from sun to shade. The native *Mahonia repens* (creeping Oregon grape) finishes out the winter with blooms that bring us into spring when dwarf *Mahonia nervosa* (Cascade Oregon grape) begins the show. Each of these species produces some fruit in summer which will be snapped up by birds, and the pollen-rich flowers and nectar attract bees galore.

Ribes sanguineum (red flowering currant) is a native plant chosen by GPP which feeds hummingbirds in late winter, and its dangling blossoms are tantalizing. For a non-GPP recommendation, check out this special plant from my home garden: *Ribes malvaceum* var. *viridifolium* 'Ortega Beauty' (Ortega Beauty chapparal currant). It has bloomed from November to March and is a continuous natural feeder for hummingbirds. Several other hummingbirds migrate into the Pacific Northwest during the growing season, and one group

striped sweat bee (*Agapostemon* spp.) on *Erigeron glaucus* 'Wayne Roderick'

ornate checkered beetle (*Trichodes ornatus*) on unknown wildflower

of plants to support the masses through summer are fuchsias. There are varieties of the Chilean native *Fuchsia magellanica* which can bloom for a longer period all the way from summer into fall which makes them indispensable and fun additions to the pollinator garden. While hummingbirds are pollinators specific to tubular, nectar-rich, and often red flowers, they can't compare to the pollinator power of bees.

When we talk about pollinators, you most often hear about bees. This makes sense because bees pollinate the most varieties of plants, from crops to ornamentals. There are over 4,000 species of bees in the United States with an estimated 700 or so species in the state of Washington. European honeybees aren't native to the US but are likely responsible for close to 75% of crop pollination. There are many types of bees, each with different pollination preferences and life histories. By learning about the diversity of types that we have in the Pacific Northwest, you can start to create a more diverse selection of plants and landscapes for them. Bumblebees (*Bombus spp.*) are extremely effective pollinators as they can buzz loudly to release pollen and are covered with hairs which pollen sticks to.

Late in the winter, we see various bumblebee species start to forage, and Mediterranean bulbs like Crocus can provide early pollen for them. For an especially early-flowering group, try *Crocus tommasinianus* (Tommasini's crocus and its cultivars) which can be planted in fall for late winter blooms and is available in most bulb catalogues. Many bumbles are generalists and will visit a variety of flowers, but specialists are important too, especially for wild populations of plants in the Pacific Northwest. Sweat bees (family *Halictidae*), leafcutter bees (*Megachile spp.*) and mason bees (*Osmia spp.*) are just a few of the major groups of native bees important to our region, and each have different ways in which they nest and forage. Most of our native bees are solitary bees, which means that the female queen does almost all the work to produce the next generation of bees; the least we can do is create a space for her to lay her head down. From bare ground to cavities, in stems and crevices, and in rocks and logs, we can all create more space for pollinators to nest.

The native camas is one of several native bulbs which attract bees in spring, and two species have been included on Great Plant Picks: *Camassia quamash* and *C. cusickii*. They are long-lived bulbs which grow best in sun to light shade and are must-haves for the Pacific

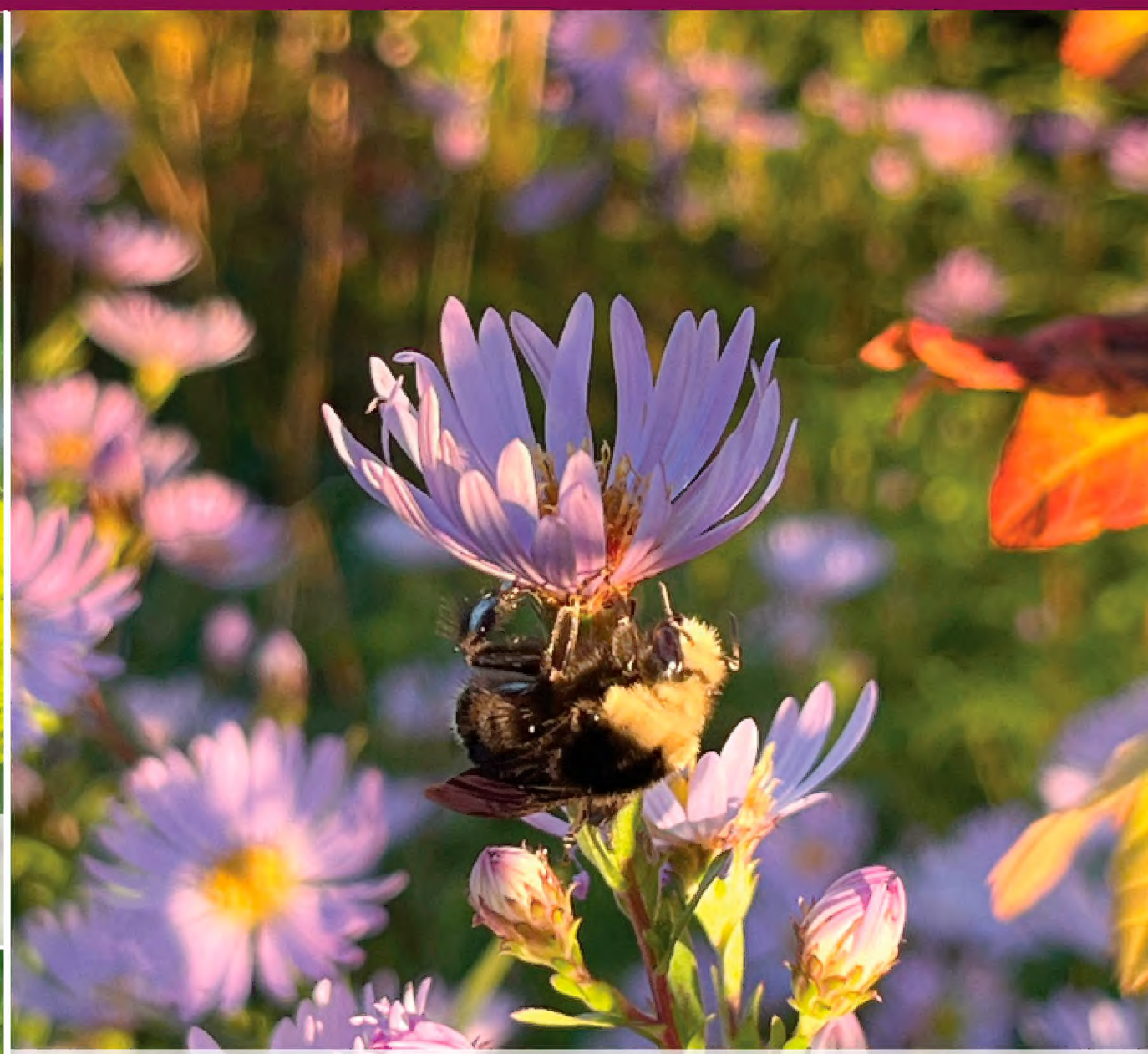
black-tailed bumblebee (*Bombus melanopygus*) being attacked by a goldenrod crab spider on *Enkianthus* cv.

***Camassia quamash* (courtesy Richie Steffen)**

swallowtail butterfly (*Papilio* spp.) on *Verbena bonariensis*

mason bee (*Osmia lignaria*) on *Eriogonum compsitum*

bumblebee (*Bombus* spp.) on *Penstemon* sp.



bumblebee (*Bombus* spp.) on *Symphotrichum subspicatum*

Northwest pollinator garden.

I love long, steadily blooming plants, and one that has been over-the-top fantabulous is a selection of the coastal Oregon native seaside daisy called *Erigeron glaucus* 'Wayne Rodrick'. This newcomer to the Great Plant Picks list seems to be a prize fighter when it comes to pollinator power. As soon as it entered the arena in my home garden, it attracted the gentle-natured, small long-horned bee (*Melissodes* spp.), which I hadn't seen before. With blooms starting in May, the plant continues to flower all the way into October, attracting a variety of insects including sweat bees. It needs just occasional water, making it very low-water tolerant. A single deadheading in the middle of summer prolonged its bloom time significantly.

To end the summer in style, I recommend two plants: a perennial sunflower and an aster, the former being a non-native and the latter a native. Both support a huge amount of pollinators, butterflies and bees included. *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen' (Lemon Queen perennial sunflower) is a GPP selection of a hybrid between two eastern US native species, and it blooms for a long period of time in late summer. With regular watering, it grows to an impressive height of about 6 to 8 feet, and its blooms are always

long-horned bee (*Melissodes* spp.) on *Helianthus* 'Lemon Queen'

covered in a variety of insects. For a last hurrah before fall, I chose a rambunctious perennial known as *Symphotrichum subspicatum* (Douglas's aster) which has beautiful pastel lavender blooms starting in September. Although not a GPP, this perennial's potential to support insects is extremely high, with many species of bees and butterflies associated with it. After the blooms fade, its tall flower stalks are very sturdy and can be used by bees to create nests.

Have you ever noticed how butterflies like to hang out in the mud? Their nectar-rich diet lacks sodium and other nutrients which they gain by hanging out drinking from shallow puddles, sometimes called puddling. If you want to grow a butterfly garden, you are going to need to look at your garden through a different lens and you must think like a butterfly. Perhaps damage to your plants is simply the larva of a local butterfly, though it could also be the perfect little bites taken by leaf cutter bees. Some butterflies are monophagus and specialized to eat a single specific plant species, like the *Fritillaria edithii*. There are many native plant species that are food sources for butterfly larva, and the Xerces Society provides great lists for our local region. Our native vine maple, *Acer circinatum*, is just one of many native trees that is eaten by butterfly larva. Some of the more common types of butterflies include swallowtails and Lorquin's admiral, but there is even greater diversity in the wildlands and especially on the eastern slopes of the Cascades and beyond.

Both bees and butterflies can benefit by a diversity of floral scents and shapes. In the case of butterflies, bright, nectar-rich flowers are especially desirable to them. Butterflies also have somewhat limited vision, so it can be worthwhile to plant in large blocks of color which can also help with people finding their way through your garden too! Many species of summer-flowering perennials are associated with butterflies, from *Symphotrichum* spp. (asters) to *Solidago* spp. (goldenrods), and the most important thing is to try to provide a variety of types to see what floats their boat.

As you plan out your garden this year and start to care for it, do think about pollinators. But even more importantly, think about how insects benefit our gardens and local wildlife beyond just through pollination. Our pollinators are extremely threatened, and it's time to take drastic action to benefit them by increasing the percentage of native plants in gardens and by utilizing a diversity of plants. Great Plant Picks is one tool you can use to pick tried and true plants for our region to benefit insects and birds of all sorts.

Del Brummet is the Head Gardener of the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden and board member of NHS.

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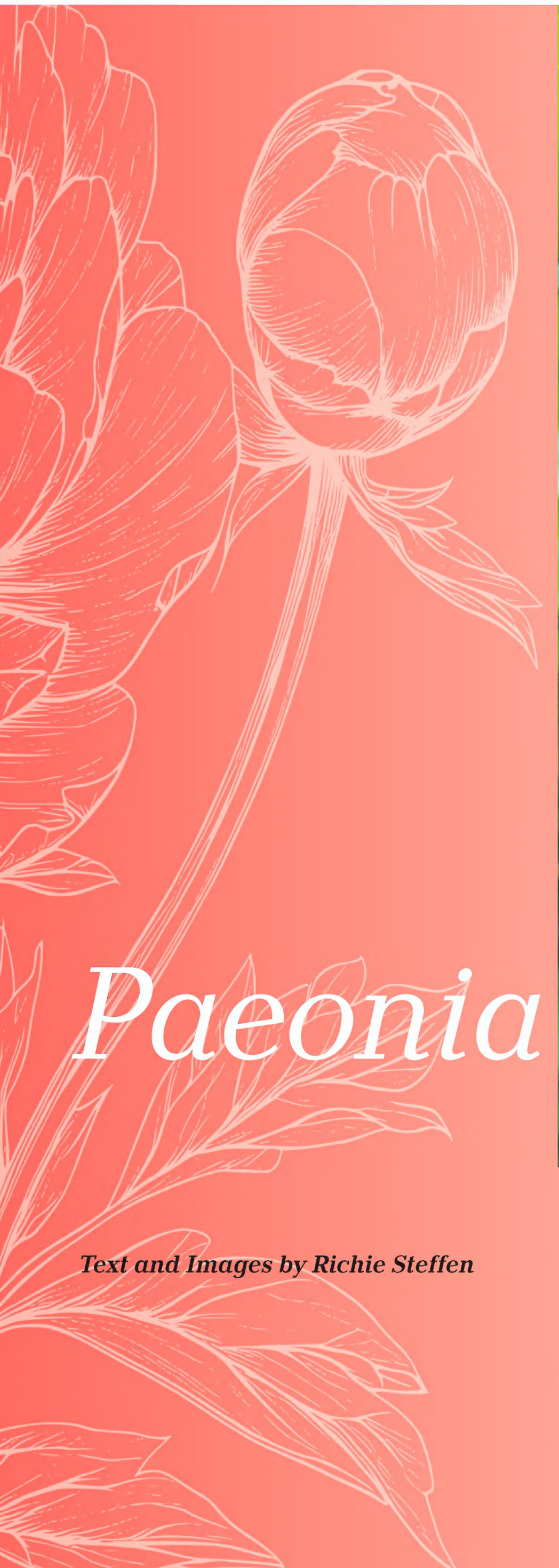


Paeonia delavayi

Text and Images by Richie Steffen

Peonies are one of those magical plants that connect so many of us to the past. The large bold blooms are spectacular in the garden and become emblazoned in our memory, reminding us of mature, beautiful plants in gardens of friends, family and neighbors. I still vividly remember a row of old herbaceous "bush" peonies edging part of the lawn at my grandparent's farmhouse in rural Pennsylvania.

When I moved to Seattle in the late 1980's, I felt that I had neither the time, patience nor permanence to commit to growing these long-lived plants. Peonies can take at least two years to become established and five years before they are generous with blooms. When I think of how I garden now, planting trees I will never see mature and rhododendrons that will not produce their first flower for ten to fifteen years, it makes me smile at my youthful impatience so many years ago. Eventually, I did start planting peonies and particularly came to admire the delicate grace and brief ephemeral flowering of peony species. Much of my appreciation for these species developed at the Miller Garden, watching the several species we grow mature and flower.

One group I especially enjoyed were the shrubby "tree" peonies. There was a large plant of *Paeonia ludlowii*, formerly *P. lutea* var. *ludlowii*. This impressive shrub towered about 8 feet tall with beautifully cut bright green leaves and single yellow flowers that hung facing downward under the foliage. Sometimes, you would need to push away some foliage to view the flowers, but they were a sight to behold! I did not know of a brighter yellow-flowered peony. We also had a few much smaller "tree" types not reaching much above three feet in height. Originally received as *Paeonia lutea*, later these would be determined to be the variable species *Paeonia delavayi*. All of the Miller Garden's plants of *Paeonia delavayi* were yellow-flowering but this species is most often known for its deep red-flowering forms.

The variability of this species has led to it being grown under several different names including *P. forrestii*, *P. handel-mazzettii*, *P. lutea*, *P. potaninii* and *P. trollioides*, as well as having several varieties, subspecies and formas being attached to the species. All are now considered one species, *Paeonia delavayi*. Occasionally, these old names can be applied to plants or can be associated with a "Group" name. Here are the characteristics one should expect from plants given these group names, but keep in mind seedlings vary!

(Forrestii Group) Generally larger than typical, yellow flowers with grayish to blue-gray foliage

(Handel-mazzettii Group) orange flowering forms, generally the result of crosses between red and yellow-flowered *P. delavayi*

(Lutea Group) yellow-flowered forms, over 2 feet tall, not stoloniferous

(Potaninii Group) plants that are low, about 2 feet tall, stoloniferous in habit, finely divided leaves with narrow leaflets, generally small red flowers

(Trollioides Group) lower than the Lutea Group, under 2 feet tall, small yellow flowers that are cup-shaped

I badly wanted to plant this species in my garden, but at the time we had a quarter-acre lot that was already

packed with plants. A tree peony, no matter how small, was not going to fit in. Okay, full disclosure, I squeezed in three. Two of these were seedlings from the yellow *Paeonia delavayi* at the Miller Garden and one was a seedling red-flowered form, originally labeled *P. potaninii* from a dear gardening friend.

A true eye opener for me was seeing a row of *Paeonia delavayi* in full flower at Blue Mountain Nursery in Tapanui, New Zealand. These had the typical yellow and red forms but also included several copper orange flowering plants that were gorgeous. After seeing this planting, I knew I would need to collect seeds from my plants to see what variation would be possible.

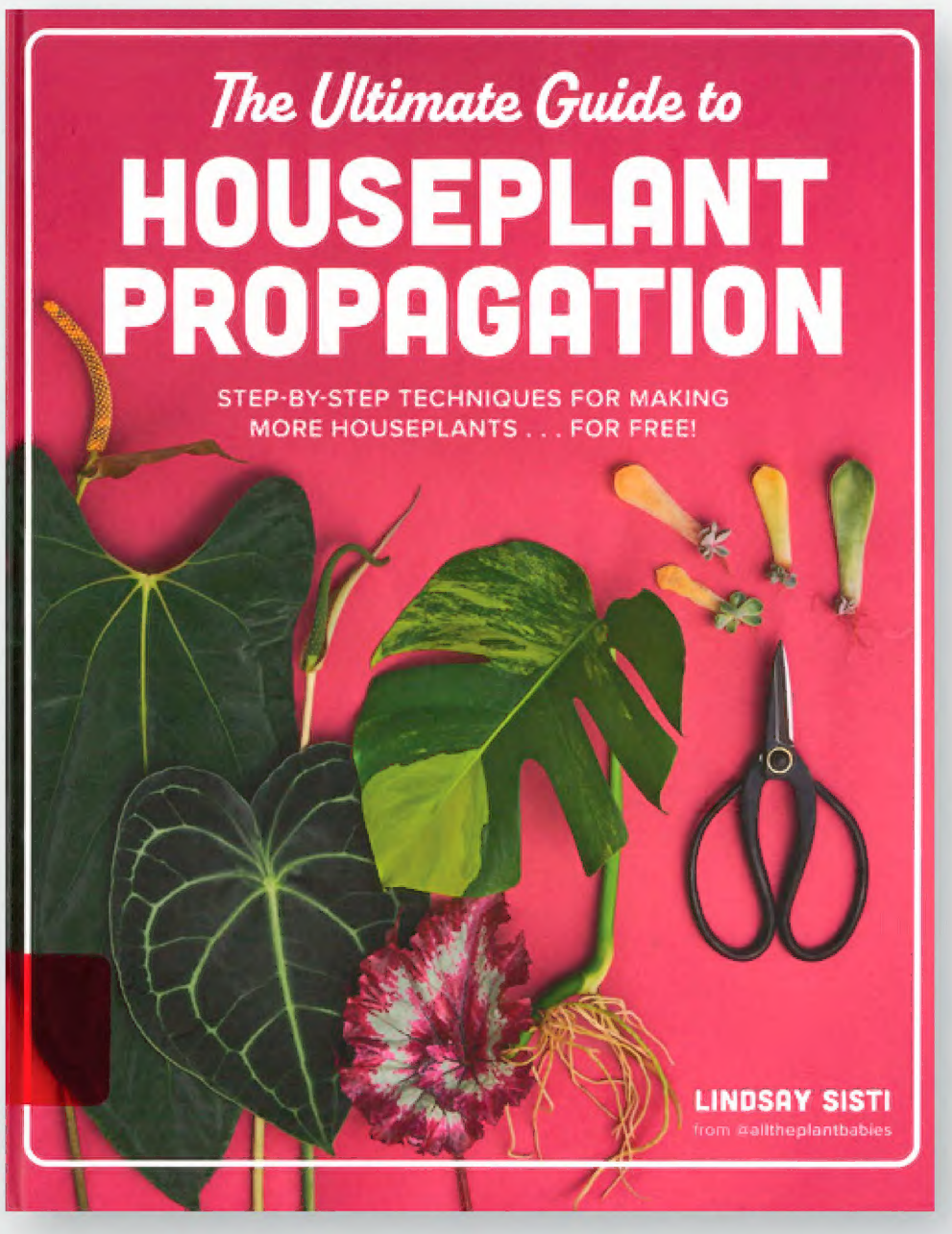
Fortunately, I now have a huge garden with plenty of room for my seedlings. They are now old enough to bloom and the range and patterns and flower size and shape has been impressive. Many of the seedlings have been coppery orange, but others have been bicolor, patterned with red and yellow.

Overall, it has been an exciting experience full of anticipation to see what the next flowering seeding has to reveal. These smaller tree peonies are well worth the time and effort to grow, so keep an eye out for your own plant and enjoy their beautiful foliage and understated charming flowers.

Richie Steffen is Executive Director of the Elisabeth C. Miller Botanical Garden and member of NHS. (Editor's note: The images are of plants in the author's home garden.)

LITERARY NOTES
from the Miller Library

Brian Thompson



I hate seeing "ultimate" in any book title. There are many good books on almost every gardening topic. How can one deserve this designation above all the rest?

I had the privilege this winter of sitting on the committee deciding the American Horticultural Society's 2025 Book Awards. As the review copies of nominated books arrived, my bias caused me to immediately downgrade *The Ultimate Guide to Houseplant Propagation* by Lindsay Sisti.

Fortunately, the rigor of the committee required me to spend much more time with this new book — and I discovered it's a treasure! I recommend it for anyone who has a pandemic induced houseplant collection and even those with a long-standing indoor forest of green.

If your propagation skills are like mine, they aren't much beyond sticking a leafy stem, broken by accident, into a glass of water and hoping it will root. While this can work, the author provides many more ways to increase your plants with greater success. I also appreciated her insights into different soil mixes, and the tools that can make your work easier. For example, I hadn't realized the value of a magnifying lens as a gardening tool.

Most of the examples use asexual propagation, but there is a chapter on creating your own hybrids from the seeds of flowering plants, using anthuriums (*Anthurium* spp.) as the model. Another chapter works through the details of increasing succulents, a process distinct from most typical houseplants. This is not a selection guide, but it does feature several of the more popular choices as examples. It also has hints for dealing with a plant that is not thriving, including freeing a pot bound underperformer, or even saving a diseased favorite.

While I haven't changed my opinion about the use of the word ultimate, I think that author Sisti has come close to that ideal. The AHS committee agrees, giving her book one of the 2025 Book Awards. Throughout, she uses a sometimes quirky sense of humor to engage the reader, but with an overall clear intent: "Do whatever brings you—and helps you spread—joy . . . and plants!"

Brian Thompson is the manager and curator of horticultural literature for the Elisabeth C. Miller Library.

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Rick Peterson
rickp@millergarden.org

Designer
Mary Gogulski
mary@gogulskidesign.com

Contributors
Laura Blumhagen
Del Brummet
Emily Dexter
Sashi Raghupathy
Richie Steffen
Brian Thompson

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dear NHS Members,

I hope you've been enjoying the spring. The past few months have been dotted with travel for me. I just wrapped up a visit to Charleston, South Carolina, and I'm writing this from Savannah, Georgia. It was my first time in South Carolina, and I'm still taking in the deep and significant history of this region and its place in the broader story of our nation. Horticulturally, I've been completely smitten by the beautiful and majestic **Southern live oak** (*Quercus virginiana*) and the incredible colonies of the epiphytic **resurrection fern** (*Pleopeltis polypodioides*) that adorn their trunks.

I've always found **encounters with trees**—especially large, old ones—to be deeply humbling. You could call me a tree hugger—I've certainly hugged my share of these majestic trees in public parks and plantations during this visit. Each encounter reinforces how small we are in the **scale of time** and how the most extraordinary things are often shaped slowly, over generations.

Another memorable trip earlier this year was attending the **Association of Professional Landscape Designers (APLD) International Conference**, held this year in San Diego. At NHS, we deeply value our mission as a forum for horticulture in the Pacific Northwest. As an umbrella organization, NHS brings together many diverse communities—and one key group that **continually elevates and energizes** our work is the professional landscape design community. Many members of this community have served on the NHS Board and continue to do so. They are not only active participants in our events and programs, but they also frequently serve as instructors and speakers. Last year, I joined the **Washington Chapter** of APLD under their Garden Enthusiast category, with the goal of immersing myself in the community and gaining a deeper understanding of how NHS can **serve and engage** with them more meaningfully.

Attending the APLD Conference was an amazing experience—a day of thought-provoking and informative lectures, followed by two days of touring remarkable gardens in the San Diego area, **curated by local experts** in the field. I was deeply moved by the warm welcome and camaraderie shown by the entire community to a first-time attendee and newcomer. It was a wonderful way to build **meaningful bonds** with this community. The experience inspired me even more to see NHS strengthen its connection with this group.

We're nearly halfway through the year, with a full calendar of programs and events behind us—and even more to come. I'm especially looking forward to continuing the NHS tradition of hosting **Members Day** at a public garden—this time at the outstanding **Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden**. Another exciting member event is coming up in July: the Meet the Board Tour, which will feature gardens in **West and South Seattle** neighborhoods. We'd love to see our members at these events—it's always a delight to connect with you in person at these special gatherings.

Over the past year and a half at NHS, our focus has been on how to **sustainably manage** the 70+ events we organize annually, across a variety of formats. While this is no small feat for a largely volunteer-driven organization, we're finally reaching a point where we feel more comfortable operating at this scale. Now, NHS is entering a new chapter—one where we can begin planning for **additional initiatives**. Some may be entirely new, while others may revive valuable programs we've set aside over the years.

Sashi Raghupathy
NHS Presidentt

Northwest Horticultural Society
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"Art is the unceasing effort to compete with the beauty of flowers — and never succeeding." **— Marc Chagall, 1887-1985**

Garden in Spring
Image by Richie Steffen

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